

Teacher Competence: In-service vs. Pre-service Teachers
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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to show teacher competence is due to not only experience but also knowledge of the subject matter. Many schools in Lebanon are suffering from teacher incompetence in general and English language teachers' incompetence in particular. Twenty pre-service and eighteen in-service Lebanese English teachers teaching in Lebanese schools across all levels from preschool up to secondary classes were observed. Primarily, they were observed for classroom management, knowledge of the subject matter, methodology, student-teacher relationship, and personal character. However, a striking factor of teacher incompetence was detected in an inadequate knowledge of the subject matter. Although all language teachers had an adequate command of the English language, it was found that incompetence was mainly manifested in an inadequate command of the subject matter. Most in-service teachers failed to provide culturally enriching classes, cater for students' needs when language arts were taught, and be wise decision makers concerning what material to teach and what to leave out. The conclusion was that language teachers needed to master the language, and be trained mainly in their practicum courses to enrich their cultural background, evaluate source material, be decision makers, and create their own resource material. (3 references)

In Lebanon, and mainly due to the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), many foreigners fled the country and consequently, there are very few native speakers teaching English at schools. Lebanese teachers are replacing native speakers in many classrooms. This is not a unique situation. All over the world, it is common to find non-native speakers teaching English to their fellow citizens. However, in Lebanon, for the past five to seven years, schools have been meeting with increasing difficulties trying to recruit qualified teachers although universities are graduating students with BA degrees in English or Education and teaching diplomas. In fact, the challenge to find a competent English teacher is increasing.

Lebanese schools are not the only schools suffering. Murray (2001) declared, "The public and the policy makers... believe that many teachers with licenses, academic degrees from accredited schools of education, certificates, and so forth, are not competent in their work." (p.51)

Sharon Robinson, president of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education said, "We are working to develop new performance assessments to confirm teacher education candidates' mastery of skills as well as content" (Magnusen 2005).

Raths and Lyman (2003), on the other hand, focus on seven areas in which incompetence is evident in pre-service teaching: knowledge of subject matter, instructional problem-solving, relationships with students, engaging students in high quality active learning, managing student behavior and classroom activities, conscientiousness as a teacher, and quality of professional judgment.

In Lebanon, school administrators have noticed that the serious problems of incompetence that student teachers suffer from persist for years after these teachers are hired full-time. School administrators try to encourage teachers to attend workshops, and quite frequently, schools organize workshops for their teachers. Nonetheless, the improvement is minimal. This leads us as trainers to question the reasons why many English teachers are incompetent and whether we should have higher expectations from student teachers as they are going through their formal education in general and when doing their practicum in particular.

Students in Lebanon seeking a B.A. in Education or English and a teaching diploma (T.D.) in any of the subjects have to satisfy a number of requirements. They have to take courses in the foundations of Education, teaching methodology, classroom management, assessment, learning theories, and finally, a practicum in which they are expected to apply the basic principles of education they have assimilated throughout their education. In all other courses but the practicum, students attend lectures and seminars, give presentations, submit projects, and do a variety of controlled assignments. In the practicum course, students are expected to observe their mentor for a minimum of five sessions and then take over some activities in the classroom, and finally teach full-sessions. We usually ask for a minimum of ten full sessions. We find no difficulty following up on the teachers' work, getting feedback from the school, the mentors, and the student teachers themselves, yet we still find it quite difficult to assess these student teachers' work at the end of the semester.

Knowing that full-time teachers need to be guided in their first years of teaching (Magnusen 2005), how much can we expect from someone who has spent three months observing, helping out and teaching? Many trainers may say not much since these student teachers did not set the rules of the classroom at the beginning of the year. They have to adopt the method the classroom teachers are adopting. In other words, they may confuse and thus mislead the students if they were to apply innovative and creative ways of teaching. Moreover, students may take advantage of these trainees or they may be very nice and sympathetic to them; in both cases, we are not testing out our trainees in a realistic situation, and thus we expect them to exhibit their maximum performance when observed, but this maximum performance is not an accurate measure of how competent these teachers maybe when they become the masters of their own classes.

As an observer and a trainer, I always felt that I needed to sympathize with student teachers because teachers need years to work on themselves, to improve, and to learn to teach better. However, when I observed experienced teachers, teachers with four to sixteen years of teaching experience, I learnt that the practicum course should provide the trainees a very basic chance to excel in their field.

In order for teachers to excel in their field they are expected to have a full command of the subject matter they are teaching, have a good background in learning theories, methodology, classroom management, assessment, as well as have the personal qualities needed for the job, such as the character, charisma, patience, devotion, interest and motivation.

Procedure

In this study, I am going to compare the performance of 18 experienced English language teachers teaching all levels from preschool to high school (4 teachers teaching preschool, 2 teachers teaching Kindergarten, 8 teachers teaching elementary level, 2 teachers teaching middle school and 2 teaching secondary) to 20 student teachers I had over the past two years. These teachers were majoring in Early Childhood and all of them were working towards a TD in English. They did their practicum in preschool, Kindergarten and low elementary (G1-3) classes. The criteria for evaluation were basically the teachers' fluency in the English language, knowledge of the subject matter, their classroom management skills, their teaching methodology, and their student-teacher interaction.

All the teachers were observed twice. All the trainees were told when I would observe, whereas the experienced teachers were told once and not told another time. All the English language teachers and trainees that I observed were Lebanese non-native speakers of English. Three of the teachers and three of the trainees were Lebanese-Armenian teachers of English.

Analysis and Discussion

Although Rath and Lyman (2003) focused on seven areas in which incompetence is evident in pre-service teaching, I am going to focus mainly on one of these areas, which is knowledge of the subject matter.

Fluency in the English language: Most of the teachers were fluent in the English language. They never stuttered or stopped to think of a word as such and they never had to restructure a sentence to get the meaning across. However, one of them who taught Kindergarten had poor pronunciation, very much influenced by her French background. Another teacher who taught the nursery class (pre-K to three-year olds) occasionally made errors in subject-verb agreement. However, as I observed these teachers very seriously, I noticed that although they are not native speakers, they could communicate fluently and to a great extent flawlessly with their students.

My student teachers' command of the language was also acceptable. I had to ask one student teacher to switch her major and teach Arabic rather than English because her command of the English language was very poor. All the others were fluent and did not make any mistakes in language as they were explaining the lesson.

Knowledge of the subject matter: It is wrong to assume that teaching low elementary classes or even Kindergarten does not require an in-depth study of the subject matter. Knowledge of the subject matter is a key factor to teacher competence. Teachers cannot teach a book unless they know much more than what is in the book. I do not mean methodology, supplementary material and other tools that may be very useful in the classroom and that will definitely facilitate student learning, but rather general knowledge of the subject matter and background information. It is only then that teachers can share

enriching experiences with their students. The warm up to the lesson and the writing assignment that may follow the lesson should aim to develop the students' awareness of various concepts, develop their critical thinking, and provide them with both content and language to express themselves freely in speech and in writing.

For example, in Lebanon, many bilingual and even trilingual schools use American books that target American students. Students as of Kindergarten study English and/or French as a second language besides Arabic, their native language. Thus, by teaching the Lebanese children from an American book, teachers are teaching the American culture. They are introducing to the children concepts and ideas that may be very remote to the Lebanese but that are very common to Americans. There is no American child who does not know Thanksgiving. However, very few Lebanese children may have heard about it and may be familiar with the significance of this feast, its date and its traditional form of celebration. Such information will not be found in the textbook. Teachers have to research it. They should not be advised to depend on their general knowledge to answer students' questions since some questions may be quite demanding.

Unfortunately, many teachers who have a number of classes to prepare quite frequently fail to prepare their lessons adequately to be culturally enriching. Students may not fully grasp the main concept behind the different reading passages. Thus, their critical thinking, imagination, and creativity may not grow to their full potential. Competent teachers who possess personal qualities, such as interest, charisma, dedication, and motivation make a difference in a student's life. In other words, teachers who are enthusiastic to develop their cultural awareness and that of their students perform more competently than teachers who stick to the book and worry about completing a program, finishing up the material assigned, and catching up with other sections. It is the trainers' duty to develop this need for cultural awareness and convince the trainees of the rationale behind making students grow culturally as they read any text because it is a skill hard to acquire through experience without formal training. Teachers are usually overwhelmed with preparation and correction. This need for continuous cultural growth experienced by both teachers and students will be the first skill to be left out from a teacher's daily lesson plan. It should not be a skill applied when the teachers know they are going to be observed. It should be an ongoing process. Student teachers may research a lesson thoroughly to impress their mentors and trainers; however, unless it is their nature to investigate such issues, or they are trained to see the need behind presenting an issue from its different perspectives, they will soon give up the practice once they meet with the workload awaiting them. One middle school student teacher was supposed to analyze a passage on dreams. Because the topic was of interest to her and because I had scheduled to observe her that day, she researched the subject very thoroughly and gave a very interesting presentation of the subject. Her problem was that she digressed from the main objective of her lesson. However, none of the experienced teachers that I observed attempted to do any kind of research and support their lessons with interesting facts or background information.

New ideas and concepts as well as cultural awareness are issues that, though time-consuming, are easy to research. However, the teachers' job becomes more difficult as they have to derive specific objectives from a lesson that vary slightly or seriously from the objectives originally designed. For example, authors of American books may single out five to six new words from each lesson to teach the students. It is the Lebanese teachers' job to know which words are new to their students and are more frequently used by the Lebanese than the ones pointed out by the authors. They have to then build activities and tasks around them. Pre-service teachers are not being trained to do such activities. Thus, we find that this incompetence persists despite the many years of experience that some teachers have. Out of the 18 teachers that I observed (and worked closely with), one teacher could develop her own material and did not feel the need to stick to the book or even the teacher's book very literally. All the other 11 teachers who taught elementary up to secondary classes depended on the vocabulary words listed in the lessons. None of them determined the students' specific needs and developed any supplementary activities to reinforce these needs.

Other similar and equally serious examples can be cited from teaching language arts to Lebanese students. American books do not stress grammar and grammatical rules as the Lebanese teachers and parents would want to see in their books. We should remember that Americans are studying their native tongue and they do not need a solid background in grammar in order for them to structure a correct sentence or to write a coherent paragraph. However, a Lebanese student who is studying three languages concurrently (keeping in mind that spoken Arabic differs substantially from written Arabic in structure and vocabulary) needs to refer to some solid "rules" to reduce the effect of interference from other languages.

Thus, teachers need to be trained to evaluate textbook material and to make wise decisions regarding when supplementary material is needed. Quite frequently, they end up giving either no supplementary material or too much, and quite often they give too much inappropriate material, which is not conducive to learning. For example, three G1 teachers explained the doubling of the consonants with the -ed and -ing inflections concurrently, simply because this is what the book says. The result was that Lebanese students had difficulty understanding the difference between the past tense and the present participle and ended up confusing the two forms. Another example is a G6 teacher who realized that there were not enough exercises on the perfect tenses in the students' books, so she got some exercises that were not up to the level and that were preceded by an inaccurate explanation. The teacher, despite her five-year experience, did not know herself when the perfect tenses are used and could not judge the material she had come across. A third example was a G8 teacher who felt that because her students knew very little grammar, she would make them "recite" grammatical rules. This teacher who had sixteen years experience knew her subject matter; i.e. her grammar very well, but she failed to make the students apply their grammatical rules in their writing. She would give her students 50-word compound-complex sentences in the active form and ask them to transform them into the passive form. When I asked her whether she would accept the students' sentences (that were transformed into the passive form) if they had

written them in an essay, she said, “No, but this is a grammar activity, which I got from a book.”

Student teachers that I have observed have done a relatively good job, but it is easy to observe that they have prepared a lesson and not a class, an activity rather than a procedure, and an assignment instead of a duty. Their lessons were neither linked to past activities or to objectives mastered through previous activities nor did they foreshadow objectives and lessons that would be covered in the near future. Their observations of their mentors were in general limited to the superficial and observable behaviors and did not touch on the rationale of an activity or methodology. One mentor once remarked after observing the student teacher give her class that there was much more that went into the planning of a class than what that trainee could think of, but that mentor had refused to sit down with the trainee to plan out a lesson with her explaining to her what needed to be stressed or left out although this was her duty.

Conclusion

Consequently, for teachers to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses and to be guided to modify their methodology, they should be regularly followed up and provided a helping hand. However, teachers can only become competent if they start by mastering their subject matters. For example, teachers teaching language arts should be competent in language arts. They should know the rules and the exceptions. They should also know exactly where students have difficulties, how to overcome these difficulties, and what to expect from each grade level so that their assessment is reliable.

Besides, student teachers should have well-rounded knowledge that by far exceeds what is in the book. This well-rounded knowledge cannot be accumulated in one academic year, but rather throughout one's education. As a result, student teachers should be trained to widen their horizons and develop a systematic manner of acquiring new information.

Moreover, student teachers should be trained to become decision makers regarding textbook evaluation, material development, and curriculum design. It is not enough to study about curriculum. Student teachers have to study their national curriculum, evaluate it, and design supplementary material that facilitates achieving the goals and objectives of the set curriculum.

Finally, student teachers cannot be misled to observe the classroom teacher or their mentor only during class hours. Student teachers have to work very closely with the mentors to choose the activities they want to engage the students with. They should defend their lesson plan and their choice of activities. Furthermore, they should be taught to look for specific problem areas students may be suffering from and to try to come up with a teaching method that will ensure students' understanding and improvement. In conclusion, in order for teachers to become more competent as they grow more experienced, they should receive training in developing these skills at university and should be very closely followed up and monitored in their first two years at work.

References:

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